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SUBJECT: PARTICIPANTS IN PEACE PROCESS BIOSOLIDS WORKSHOP

EXCHANGE INFORMATION AND E-MAIL ADDRESSES

¶11. Summary: Twenty-five representatives from Israel, Jordan and the Palestinian Authority plus five USG officials met in Sydney March 7-10 in a Peace Process workshop on using biosolids in agriculture. The workshop was sponsored by the State Department and presented by USDA and EPA.

Participants represented a wide range of ministries, were well-qualified professionally, prepared and gave detailed presentations, and collegially engaged in substantive discussions. They want related, on-the-ground, practical activities in the region as a follow-up. Support from ConGen Sydney was exemplary. End summary.

Multi-Agency Approach to Biosolids

¶12. The Sydney workshop was the fifth in a series of workshops organized under the Multilateral Working Group on the Environment related to the Middle East peace process. Dr. Sylvana Li from USDA/FAS/ICD was the principal organizer, Bob Brobst (EPA), Bob Bastian (EPA) and Dan Sullivan (Oregon State University) planned the agenda, and Jim Smith and Bob Brobst from EPA managed the workshop itself. The core party participants came principally from water authorities, agriculture ministries, environment agencies and health agencies in Jordan, Israel and the Palestinian Authority. There were also legal and energy specialists in the group. Consul General Stephen Smith opened the workshop with remarks highlighting the importance of water and the knowledge of the participants about how to manage it.

"Beneficial Use" Builds Agriculture, Protects Environment

¶13. Previous workshops in this series in Cyprus, Athens, Amsterdam and Barcelona covered a variety of topics on hazardous waste and wastewater reuse. The genesis of biosolids as a topic came from suggestions made at prior workshops. Biosolids are a processed form of the sludge that results from wastewater treatment. Currently handled as a waste product in Jordan and the West Bank, sludge processed into biosolids can serve as a fertilizer when processed and applied properly. Termed "beneficial use," the use of biosolids in agriculture has twin benefits: reducing environmental damage from dumping sludge in landfills or in the ocean, and enhancing crop yields and soil quality.

Public Acceptance is Crucial

¶14. There is science to using biosolids appropriately, and there are major management challenges as well. Scientific issues include eliminating pathogens, managing heavy metals and determining appropriate application methods and quantities. The key issue, though, is public acceptance. Participants recognized that the best science would be useless if the public opinion turns against biosolids. Educating the public about the actual risks from pathogens and chemical contaminants in biosolids is critical. Paradoxically, animal manure, although fundamentally the same as human biosolids, is much less regulated than biosolids for historical reasons and is perceived as a "natural" and organic substance. Chemical fertilizers are also lightly regulated and do not arouse strong public views. Biosolids, however, have the potential to engender a negative public reaction in the form of consumer rejection of crops grown with biosolids.

Israel has Experience; All Parties Cautious

¶15. Of the three core parties participating in the workshop, only Israel is currently using biosolids in agriculture on a large scale. As a measure of Israel's concern over public opinion, Israel is carefully testing and regulating the production and application of biosolids. Israel plans to move by 2007 to producing solely "Class A" biosolids that, although they contain fewer nutrients than "Class B," have virtually no pathogens. Current regulations include restrictions on transportation, standards for maximum amounts of a long list of potential contaminants, warning labels, and restrictions on when, where and how biosolids can be applied. Many of the restrictions focus on limiting

human exposure to biosolids, for example by prohibiting its use in parks and gardens, near water sources, and on produce directly consumed by people. Israel has adopted a go-slow approach that promotes biosolids for less sensitive applications such as growing animal fodder, reclaiming rangeland and growing trees. The "beneficial use" of biosolids as fertilizer is prohibited in Jordan, but Jordan is moving cautiously towards legalization, in part with USAID-funded research by the International Arid Lands Consortium. The Palestinian Authority is also researching biosolids with an eye towards permitting its use in agriculture.

Benefits to Agriculture are Clear

16. Results of scientific studies presented at the workshop demonstrated the agronomic benefits to the farmer of using biosolids instead of conventional fertilizer. Test plots in long-term studies showed distinct improvement in both crop quality and quantity when using biosolids in place of chemical fertilizers, although these gains don't emerge until after the first year. Side-by-side test plots showed that plants treated with biosolids were larger, had a richer color, had more blossoms and contained higher quality grain (e.g. more protein) than conventionally farmed crops. These benefits stem from the natural condition of the principal nutrients (nitrogen, phosphorus, potassium) and the presence of iron, zinc and other micronutrients in the biosolids.

Participants Want More Focused, Practical Follow-up

17. At the wrap-up session and in follow-up comments, the overall reaction of participants was that the workshop was excellent and highly appreciated. One participant wanted to see more presentations from the United States and other international experts, and fewer from regional participants. This was because the U.S. and international experts generally are seen as having more experience and knowledge, and because there was significant overlap between the participants' presentations. Several participants felt that a more focused and practical event with more depth on fewer topics would serve their needs better than the format used in this workshop. They also suggested that the next activity could take place in the Middle East. Several participants asked about funding for similar activities in the future.

18. The atmosphere at the workshop was focused, participatory and professional, with occasional flashes of humor that remarkably included references to some of the touchiest aspects of Israeli-Palestinian relations. In the wrap-up session, participants offered several ideas for additional workshops, and stressed the need for practical discussion that goes beyond theory. They also offered unvarnished comments on the workshop and the field trip, which provided useful feedback to workshop organizers.

19. Comment: These workshops clearly advance U.S. interests on several fronts, including expanding scientific knowledge, building capacity, building person-to-person contacts in the region, and advancing a sustainable development agenda in the Middle East. The productivity of these workshops has been increasing over the years, and participants are ready to undertake practical projects in the region as a supplement to the more theoretical workshops.

110. This message was cleared by Dr. Li from USDA/FAS.

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